

Book reviews

Philosophy of Medicine

Henrik Wulff, Stig Pedersen, Ruben Rosenberg, 222 pages, Oxford, £22.50 Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1986.

'Philosophy of Medicine, an introduction' was written by three Danish authors, Henrik Wulff a physician, Stig Pedersen a philosopher, and Ruben Rosenberg a psychiatrist. It is a book written for those with little or no philosophical knowledge. The authors introduce Kuhn's model of the development of science. During periods of normal science, scientists work with the existing paradigm (set of ideas). During these periods scientists are involved in puzzle-solving activity, further articulating the paradigm. As more and more anomalies appear in the ruling paradigm science moves into a period of extraordinary science. During this period scientists are no longer working within a single paradigm. It is an immensely creative time when scientists must look at what they are doing afresh. The authors argue that medicine is now going through a period of paradigmatic instability. Doctors need to look afresh at their ideas, what they are doing, their roles and their responsibilities to patients and society.

The authors point out that medicine has been dominated by the empiricist school of philosophy developing through Locke, Berkeley and Hume and culminating in logical positivism. This has produced the strictly objective scientific approach to medical problems. It is relatively new and has undoubtedly been of immense value. Moreover it has produced simplistic notions of the differences between health and disease. In a disputation between two imaginary physicians the authors argue that to regard disease as purely biological dysfunction is inadequate. For different patients the same disease can have very different

meanings. Moreover what is registered by the observer as biological dysfunction depends on his own observations and there is no such thing as a purely objective observation.

The authors conclude that the biological concept of disease must be superseded, or at least expanded, by a point of view that can take into account morals, values and meanings as well as objective facts. They suggest that a different philosophical approach may have much to offer. They examine the work of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre and Habermas. These philosophers are concerned with phenomenology, existentialism and hermeneutics and are far removed from the empiricists. A hermeneutic enquiry seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon and to interpret its significance. Because human beings are reflective, self-conscious and capable of choice they cannot when ill be regarded in the same light as a broken-down car. Moreover a hermeneutic approach to society not only looks at statistical relations between social variables but also studies the values, attitudes and motives operating within a society in order to understand the meanings of these relationships and how they operate.

The final part of the book looks at some of the ethical dilemmas facing today's doctors, for example: experimentation on human embryos; patient participation in drug trials; informed consent; patient information, and autonomy and paternalism. They discuss the origins of morality and the structure of ethical reasoning.

It is an excellent book. Clearly written, it approaches often difficult concepts and explains them simply without patronising the reader. Such clarity is unfortunately rare in philosophy books. The subject matter is fascinating and challenging. Moreover it was so fluently written that I found it hard to put down.

I defy any doctor to read it and not gain new insights into his or her professional attitudes.

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Legal Frontiers of Death and Dying

Norman L Cantor, 208 pages, Indiana, \$24.95, Indiana University Press, 1987.

While 'live-and-let-die' issues continue to be debated here as questions of ethics, in the USA at any rate they are fast becoming questions of law. State Supreme Courts are handing down judgements, and state legislatures are enacting statutes, setting out the principles and procedures to be followed in deciding whether, and when, it is legitimate not to seek to prolong the lives of various categories of sick people by various kinds of medical intervention.

To many, and especially to non-lawyers, this might seem a trackless jungle. For them, Professor Cantor's book will provide an admirable guide. He starts with patients competent to decide such things for themselves, and shows how the notions of autonomy (*alias* self-determination) and what some have called the 'rights-regarding model' have come to dominate the philosophy which the US courts have been evolving in such cases. After demolishing some distinctions which he regards as myths – such as omission v commission, extraordinary procedures v ordinary ones, and so forth – he passes on to incompetent patients, and examines first the criteria for making decisions about what is left of their lives (subjectively: What would they decide if